



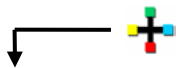
The Gospel in Today's Global City

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We are celebrating the re-launch of the old Mission Department of the Selly Oak Colleges as the School of Mission and World Christianity. This is surely a proper and necessary move. For the past 40 or 50 years missionary thinking within the ecumenical movement has recognised that the old colonial pattern is out of date. We have recognised that the movement of world mission can no longer be thought of as a one-directional thrust from Europe and North America and must be recognised as the responsibility of the universal church in all six continents. The "home base" is everywhere and the "mission field" is everywhere. Memory of the old colonial pattern has become an occasion for acute embarrassment among many Christians. What Lamin Sanneh identifies as the western guilt complex is now a very powerful factor in the ecumenical scene.

Global realities and parochial attitudes

However, as far as the general public is concerned, there is very little awareness of the reality of world Christianity. The general public, and even the wider Christian public, is still very parochial in its thinking. The ancient pattern of religious territoriality is still deeply engraved in the mind of the public. If you come from Europe you are a Christian, if from India, a Hindu, if from Burma a Buddhist. Exceptions are anomalies. The fact that there are now more Anglicans in Nigeria than in the whole of Europe and North America put together is hardly believed. The fact that the Christian Church is now, statistically speaking, predominately an African society, that it is by a wide margin the largest of the world's faith communities, and that it is rapidly growing – all this is beyond the horizon of general public awareness.

This parochialism in the public's thinking about religion is in contrast to the globalization of thinking about secular matters. There is general recognition of the fact that we are part of a single global market, locked into a single financial-industrial mechanism. We cannot erect protective walls around any part of the global city (for it is a city and not a village). What is economically possible for Britain depends upon decisions made in Japan, Korea and other places. As our global thinking is conducted in these secular terms, so we assume that global, geopolitical issues are essentially secular. For a long time we have accepted the Weberian view that secularization is an

inevitable and irreversible process. The development of science and technology, the bureaucratization of human life, the extension of strictly rational forms of organization all these, it has been assumed, must necessarily drive religion to the margins of public life. Belief in the supernatural, in divine revelation, in angels and demons might persist in the private

world of family and church but must inevitably disappear from the area of public discourse. Religion has to retreat to the edge of human life, the place which it has occupied in Europe for the past two centuries.

Nevertheless, this belief is now being called into question. Religious fundamentalism is now one of the major players on the geo-political stage. I am well aware that the term "fundamentalism" is a slippery one. It is generally used in a pejorative sense. It can be used by those who have no religious belief to label anyone whose religious beliefs are central and determinative. Its content differs when applied to different religions. But we cannot altogether avoid using the word, for there is a new reality which must be recognised. Muslim fundamentalism is the most widely acknowledged. Elections in India have shown that Hindu fundamentalism is a powerful political force. And, of course, we recognize that Christian fundamentalism is a major force in the current politics of the United States. All this poses new questions to the ecumenical missionary thinking of the past half century.

As I said earlier, this thinking has been dominated by the recognition that the old colonial pattern of world-mission is no longer appropriate. This recognition has been accompanied by feelings of guilt. However, I would like to enter a word of dissent, or at least of qualification. The currently accepted stereotype of the missionary as an ignorant fool who went around the world destroying beautiful cultures which he was too stupid to understand is really not adequate to the facts. We have to acknowledge wrong doings and wrong attitudes - and it is of course easier and more pleasant to repent of the sins of our forebears than to acknowledge our own. But our main response to the record of the world missionary movement of the last two centuries must surely be one of wonder and gratitude.

When a generation of students at the turn of this century announced as their goal "the evangelization of the world in this generation", most church leaders scoffed. But after a century, if not a generation, we now celebrate the astounding fact that, for the first time in human history, the Christian church and its witness to the Gospel is present in every nation on earth. It is this achievement that allows us now to recognize that the home base is everywhere, that world mission is the responsibility of the world-wide church. It ill befits us to treat with contempt the outlook of those who have made this possible.

What is the essential task of mission today?

Within this world-wide fellowship, how should we interpret the missionary task now? Here I must refer to the dominant role played by the mainline Protestant churches of Europe and North America, both in the movement of world mission and in the ecumenical movement. In the new situation the missionary agencies of these

churches have tended to see their role as facilitators of interchange between the churches throughout the world. The concepts of partnership, mutual help and mutual learning have been dominant. The missionary concern in its more traditional mode, that is to say, the passion to move beyond the frontiers of Christendom and to bring the Gospel to the unevangelised, has very largely been left to bodies outside the organised ecumenical movement.

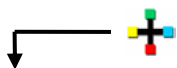
The call to bring the Gospel to peoples hitherto unreached does not evoke an enthusiastic response in many ecumenical circles. But this can only have the most serious consequences. In

one of his last major public addresses on this matter, Visser't Hooft, great architect of the World Council of Churches, speaking at the World Missionary Conference in Mexico City in 1963, took as his title: "Mission the Test of Faith". His thesis was simple: a church which no longer seeks to bring the Gospel to those who have not heard it, or have not accepted it, is a church which no longer believes the Gospel; consequently, the decay of this basic passion for evangelization must inevitably bring decay to the church itself. In a widely reported address to churchmen in the USA, the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg expressed the opinion that unless the mainline liberal Protestant Churches can recover their faith in the central verities of the Gospel, their present decline will be terminal. I recently had occasion to ask Professor Pannenberg whether he thought that attention was being paid to his warning. His answer was "No".

I am a product and a member of one of these "mainline liberal Protestant churches". I have to ask myself: "how do we understand our missionary calling within the ecumenical fellowship of the world-wide church?". I think one approach to the answering of this question is to look at the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism - something which I think the ecumenical movement has not adequately addressed. I think we have to understand religious fundamentalism as a cry for life. Mainline liberal churches have in general accepted the secular society as a space within which they could live provided they had freedom of belief, speech and worship.

Beyond the secular world-view

However, people are finding that the secular world-view is not ultimately sustainable. It does not enable human beings to live and flourish as they should. The concept of a secular society is a distinctive product of western Christendom. It is a product which has brought us many blessings. Above all, it freed us from the horrors of inter-religious war, precisely by removing the influence of religious belief from the public domain. We have to be thankful for this deliverance. However, the secular society is proving, in the long run, inadequate to the needs of human beings. It is instructive at this point to notice what is happening in the United States which



has been and still is the pace-setter in the development of a society based on the principles of scientific rationality and technical efficiency.

I refer to two recently published books, coming from the mainstream of liberal Protestantism, which have been widely discussed. The first is the work of Stephen Carter, Law Professor at Yale, whose book *The Culture of Unbelief* examines a succession of judgements handed down by the US Supreme Court and shows how these have, with increasing rigour, displaced from the public arena anything based on religious belief and, by so doing, effectively established another set of beliefs in the driving seat of public life. The second is the work of George Marsden entitled *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Unbelief*. He tells the story of the renowned universities which began as colleges devoted to the provision of a liberal education rooted in the Christian faith but in which, today, any explicit religious conviction is strictly excluded from the teaching offered.

The two books, in different ways, show how the elimination of religion from the public square (to which we owe our deliverance from the horror of religious wars) has now resulted in a very powerful form of thought-control. The elimination of religion does not produce an empty space for the free exercise of religion; it produces a society in which public life is controlled by a set of beliefs which make claims on human allegiance no less comprehensive than those of religion.

Christian fundamentalism in the United States must be seen as a violent reaction to this very powerful form of thought-control. We do not, as yet, have anything quite comparable in Britain. Nevertheless, I think this American experience may help us to understand the beginnings of Muslim fundamentalism in this country. The majority of British Muslims are living in the most deprived areas of our large cities and experience at first hand the worst results of the secular

ideology. For there does not seem to be any logical stopping place on the slope which leads a purely secular society into a pagan society. As Nietzsche so clearly saw, if there is no God anything goes. All attempts to base effective moral norms on an atheistic philosophy are bound to collapse. The result is the society with which we are becoming familiar, in which there are no land-marks, no fixed points of reference, no public belief about the purpose of human beings, only the desire to gratify every immediate want.

When some young Muslims uncompromisingly reject allegiance to this kind of society and insist that the rule of God over all human life be acknowledged, I am amazed at the complacency with which many Christians seem to accept a secular society as one in which they can be content to live. Where there is no God, life

becomes finally meaningless and senseless. We may work ourselves up into a froth of indignation over the sticky mess of violence, drugs and gang warfare. But should we not realize how far down the slope we have gone when a British Prime Minister takes prime time on television to announce the latest jewel in the crown of our statecraft - a lottery?

Religious fundamentalism is a manifestation of the inadequacy of the secular ideal to meet human needs. We may disagree with our Muslim fellow citizens about the manner in which we understand God's exercise of his rule over human life. However, we cannot, I believe, ignore the very sharp questions which Islam puts to our cosy co-habitation with the secular society: Do you believe that God is Lord over the public life of society, its economics, its politics, its culture? Or do you believe that his rule is limited to the Church and the home?

The reality of a world-wide Christian Church

In our global city, the world-wide Christian Church is becoming a recognisable reality. Through the organs of the ecumenical movement and in many other ways, Christians in different parts of the world are made aware of one another and develop a sense of responsibility towards one another. The current W.C.C. study on "Gospel and Culture" is highlighting the need to hold together the different cultural expressions of the Christian faith in the integrity and singularity of the Gospel, although it is beset by the difficulty of recognising the cultural particularity of the very method of study employed.

Along with efforts to articulate the unity-in-diversity of the world-wide Christian communion, there is the insistent question, of special concern to the School of Mission and World Christianity, about the nature of the mission which this community is required to prosecute beyond its own frontiers, for the sake of the whole human family. What is our stated missionary task? The emphasis in the mainline ecumenical movement in recent years has been on issues of justice, peace and the integrity of creation, and these are indeed life-and-death issues for all humanity. The addressing of these issues is an essential part of our calling as Christians. In so far as we fail to address these issues, the integrity of our witness to the Gospel is in question. Nevertheless, these are not the supreme issues. They are about the penultimate, but not the ultimate questions. The ultimate question is: Who is Lord? Who has the last word? To whom is total allegiance due?

In the contemporary global city it is assumed that final authority rests with the impersonal forces of the market. Even the most powerful governments and transnational corporations have to submit to this superior power. To a Christian who has understood the New Testament it is obvious that we are here speaking of



one of the "principalities, powers, dominions" of which both Jesus and Paul speak, entities created to serve human welfare but which, when claiming absolute power, become demonic. Such powers do not yield to argument or moral persuasion. It is only by the power of God that they are cast out.

Specifically it is Christ who, as the New Testament tells us, has disarmed (not destroyed) the powers so that they may perform their true function of serving human welfare. We are in the realm of spiritual warfare. It is in the atoning work of Jesus on the cross that the ruler of this world has been judged and cast out of his usurped dominion (John 12.31f). The central responsibility of the Church is to proclaim this fact, to embody it in its own life, and to rely upon the Holy Spirit to transform the weak and foolish witness of the Church into the power and the wisdom of God. It is to communicate this Gospel to the world in a total activity which encompasses word and deed, message and life, indissolubly held together.

Dialogue and a truth-claim

Our embarrassment about the colonial style of earlier missions has led us to be reluctant about anything like unilateral proclamation. In reaction against perceived arrogance in the missionary work of the past, we emphasize the need for listening, for learning, for dialogue. And dialogue is, of course, the precondition for any communication of the Gospel. But dialogue cannot take us all the way.

The concept of dialogue, as it functions in this discussion, is rooted in the classical, Greek elements of our culture. Here ultimate truth is sought in the realm of ideas, of eternal truths transcending the accidental happenings of history. Dialogue in this sense seeks an ultimate agreement about what must be true for all people through probing, testing, enlarging and correcting the insights of the participants in an exchange of wisdom. But in the Biblical part of our cultural inheritance, ultimate truth is found not in time-transcending ideas (Plato) or forms (Aristotle) but in particular events in recorded history. Dialogue cannot discover these events. They have to be reported. Someone who knows the facts has to report them to those who do not. This is the starting point of a dialogue, not its product.

The paradigm dialogue in the New Testament is that between Jesus and the woman of Jacob's well (John 4). It begins, as all dialogue must, with shared human concerns - water, thirst and the means of quenching it. At an early stage, the woman tries to steer the conversation in the direction of comparative religion - a dialogue between Mount Gerizim and Mount Zion. She does not succeed. In the end she is presented with a unilateral statement. "I, who speak with you, am He". That closes this dialogue; though it opens the way for others. After this, it is a question of believing or not believing.



Dialogue in its classical mode presupposes the existence of beliefs common to both parties, beliefs to which appeal can be made by either party in the course of the discussion. In the case of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we are dealing not with claims which could be tested against more ultimate truths, but with a final truth-claim itself. The New Testament repeatedly asserts, in one way or another, that the whole fact of Christ (his incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection) is either a stone of stumbling, to be discarded, or else the corner stone on which the whole building is itself constructed. It is not something which can be fitted into another kind of edifice, a structure of belief, built on another foundation. It is either something to be rejected, or something which becomes the new starting point for all thought and all action. If the Jesus whom we know through the apostolic witness is truly the word through whom and for whom all things have their being, then there cannot exist any more comprehensive frame of thought into which he could be fitted.

We are faced here with an inescapable question to which we have to answer either yes or no. If Jesus is the incarnate word of God, then every other proposal for the understanding of the cosmos and of our place within it is subject to final judgement in the light of his words and works. We can only try to place him in a supposedly more comprehensive frame of thought, if we reject the apostolic testimony as we have it in Scripture.

The integrity of a world-wide faith

To post the question in this way is very painful. We are rightly thankful to the Enlightenment for delivering us from the horror of the religious wars. It is impossible to understand the Enlightenment and the whole development of the idea of a secular society unless we remember this dark and bloody background. We are rightly troubled by the re-appearance in our time of bloody conflicts breaking out along the old frontiers between the territorial religions of the past. The editor of the journal, *The Tablet*, has described these conflicts by using the vivid parable of the friction of the continental tectonic plates: when they rub against one another, they produce earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and general mayhem. Something like this, he suggests, is happening in Bosnia, Nagorney Karabagh and Chechenia. Even though these are not explicitly religious wars, we cannot ignore the fact that they are occurring at the friction points between the old territorial religions of Islam and Christendom.

It is one of the positive achievements of the Enlightenment that it destroyed, at least for Christians, this concept of territoriality. Hindu fundamentalism certainly affirms the territorial principle, and so do some Muslims in different parts of the Islamic world. It is one of the blessings that we owe to the Enlightenment that the worldwide Christian fellowship, the bearer of world mission today, no longer holds on to



the territorial principle. These Christian communities with whom we share fellowship are made up of people whose allegiance to Jesus Christ is a matter of personal decision and devotion, not a corollary of national, ethnic or political affiliation. The integrity of their faith requires that they proclaim Jesus as he is - the living word of God, the Saviour of the world. This constraint to proclaim the universal reign of Jesus is inseparable from the holding of the faith itself.

But will this proclamation not lead us back into the age of the religious wars, of Jihad and Crusade? Is it not an absolute obligation resting upon every sane person to seek peace among the religions, especially in view of the rise of the new fundamentalisms? This raises some of the most acute problems we have to face. While every sane person must recognize the need to seek peace among the religions, no less than among the nations, we also know that peace is not to be purchased at any price, not at a price which includes the abandonment of justice and of truth.

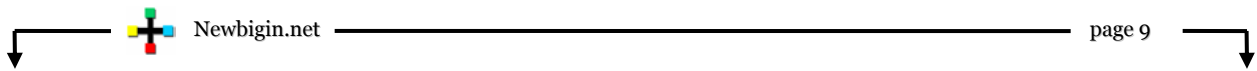
The Enlightenment, and the secular society which it has bequeathed to us, have sought to solve this problem by relegating the claims of religion to the private sphere, typically by treating the different religions as if they were but different paths up the same mountain. In this view we are all encouraged to pursue the path we have chosen, not seeking conflict or competition with others, knowing that, if we continue faithful to our chosen path, we shall all meet at the top of the same mountain.

Conflicting truth-claims, and a promise of peace

This way of looking at the reality of religion is often offered as a recipe for peace among conflicting truth claims. However, seldom is it recognised as itself a truth claim, indeed a truth-claim of breath-taking audacity. It is a claim to a revealed knowledge hidden from Plato, Moses, Gautama, Confucius, Jesus and Mohammed and still hidden from their disciples. One has to call the bluff of those who make this claim by asking: "How do you know?" "Where did you find the helicopter which enabled you to see all sides of the mountain simultaneously, and thus behold what is hidden from the rest of us?"

We cannot accept the claim, for it has no basis. On the contrary, we have to affirm that it is an intrinsic part of what it means to be human to seek and affirm the truth, telling it to others as it is given to us to know it. This task necessarily involves us in struggle, because, within the limits of human history, all truth-claims can and will be contested until the day of judgement.

We must have the courage to maintain and confess the truth even in the midst of conflict. This means that we have to recover the concept of spiritual warfare and



struggle, of jihad, to use the language of our Muslim fellow-citizens, but not the kind which leads to the crusade. How can we ensure that this latter does not happen? Only by going back to that which is the centre of the Gospel, namely the cross of Jesus Christ. Only if we constantly remember that when Jesus sent his disciples out into the world, he first showed them his hands and his side. The scars of the passion are to be the authenticating signs by which the Church is recognised as his representative.

The skills needed for a true spiritual warfare

Here the fact that the world-wide church which is now the true base for world-wide mission is not the strong, wealthy, arrogant old Christendom of Europe, but a fellowship of believers scattered throughout the world, often in minority situations, often suffering under harsh persecution, always requiring personal courage to share their faith with their neighbours, should help to save us from the errors which we deplore in our past. It is from these communities, I believe, that we in the old Christendom must learn afresh the skills needed for a true spiritual warfare.

I personally am not a good teacher in these arts. I am the product of a tradition which did not think in these terms. Very early in my life as a young missionary working with Indian colleagues, I had to learn from them and to find that most of what I thought I had to say was trivial. We have to learn from St. Paul about this spiritual warfare and to learn how to put on the appropriate armour. The only offensive weapon he enlists is the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God - that apparently weak and powerless word of witness to Christ, which even in the mouth of an unworthy speaker, can become the mighty instrument of the Spirit to convict, to teach and to guide. He speaks of the necessary means of defence - above all the shield of faith, that tough, stubborn commitment to the Gospel when so much opposition is arraigned against it. But, most important of all, Paul speaks of the constant, all encompassing practice of prayer which is the mightiest power of all.

I rejoice at the launching of the School of Mission and World Christianity, for I am sure that, in the ecumenical community which Selly Oak provides, new generations from this and many other countries will be prepared and equipped for this spiritual warfare to the glory of the Triune God. With all my heart I pray that it may be so.

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